

I'm Having To Change My Mind About A Lot
Of Things These Days
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. My name is Leon Dunkley and I am honored to serve as minister here at North Universalist Chapel Society (or North Chapel) in Woodstock, Vermont. Today is Independence Day. Today is Sunday, Fourth of July and the title of this morning's reflection is I'm Having To Change My Mind About A Lot Of Things These Days. To all souls, I say, "Good morning. It is good to be together."

It is not important to search for that which simply cannot be found. It is important to search—and to search without ever ceasing—for that which is rarest, for that which is singular and most precious in all the world.

I'm having to change my mind about a lot of things these days. So, I'm glad that I'm learning to stretch...glad that I'm learning to be flexible.

I'm a rescuer by family training. That's the role that I've played for many years...for so many years, in fact, that my family can't remember otherwise. I can't remember otherwise but I know I wasn't always this way.

Rescuing, for me, is self-protective. I can deal with a crisis better if I dive right in. Head-long. Sometimes, I'm helpful. Other times, though, I'm just busying myself in a helpful way. Either way, I need time when the crisis is over to rest up and to rejuvenate myself. It's a process...and one that I am not always fully aware of in the moment.

Being a rescuer is really awesome...half of the time. When I do it healthily, it's easy. It feeds me, actually. I'm glad to offer whatever energy I might have. It enriches me. I benefit. I grow from the giving. I learn more about myself, more about others. That's when I do it well.

When I don't do it well, being a rescuer utterly exhausts me. I feel heavy and resentful. I feel tired and irritable...and it has nothing to do with the situation in which I find myself. It's not like when I'm helping people who I know and love, I'm all light and happy and when I'm helping the people who I don't know and maybe don't even like, I'm heavy and mean. Life is not that simple... Well, my life is not that simple. Sometimes—most of the time, if I'm honest with myself—it's when I'm with the people that I love the most that I become the most irritable. It makes sense somehow that that would be the case.

It's also true that when I'm irritable and NOT perfectly healthy about how I'm doing things, I am in the process of learning something. I would love to think that that is broadly true. I would really love to think that that is universally true but it probably isn't. I think it's only universally possible. That's good enough...because it gives me a choice. I can choose to grow OR I can choose to just stay right where I am. Heavy, mean, irritable, unhealthy and stuck with all of that.

There's a saying that I learn from a dear colleague in Boston years ago. She would always say, "Change is inevitable. Growth...growth is optional." I like pithy sayings like that. They don't always rise to the level of theology for me but they are fun to preach about.

One such pithy, little saying is "15 minutes of fame." Are you familiar with that expression? I looked online to find out more about its history and I learned that it is "a well-known as a quotation from Andy Warhol and it traces back to 1968 but it changed over time. Now, it's different. The original line was this...Warhol said, 'In the future everybody will be world famous for fifteen minutes.'" This quotation derived from an earlier expression of the same concept in English cultural life. It dates back at least as far as the Elizabethan era. They used the phrase the "nine days' wonder" to convey the same idea but it seems to be slowly depreciating over time. Four hundred years before Warhol, we spoke of the nine days of wonder. In 1968, Warhol talked about the 15 minutes of fame. Perhaps, hundreds of years from now, we'll talk about the 28 seconds of quasi-disinterest. If the current trend continues, we'll have gone from wonder, to fame, to low-level curiosity over the better part of a millennium, unless we change our minds about all of that. And the duration will change as well. We'll have gone from 9 days, to 15 minutes, to 29 seconds...unless, or course, we decide to change our minds.

It would be a strange, collective choice...to choose depreciation—actively or passively. I mean it's not a choice that I would like to make. I think that it would be better for us to choose otherwise, to go in the opposite direction...to become more and more filled up with wonder...not less and less.

Fifteen minutes of fame... I actually love this expression although we tend to use the concept rather loosely. In fact, there's this film called *The Insider* (Al Pacino, Russell Crowe, Christopher Plummer, Phillip Baker Hall). And in this film, there is a scene where these men are arguing about the value of telling the truth about big tobacco, about nicotine and its addictive qualities, its health hazards, its connection to lung cancer and so on. Phillip Baker Hall played a character named Don Hewitt, the former television executive at 60 Minutes. Hewitt is enraged because the New York Times had just run a explosive article about a private conversation that took place at CBS.

Al Pacino plays a character named Lowell Bergman. He worked under Hewitt and Berman said, quite passionately,
Big Tobacco tried to smear [our whistle-blower] and you bought it, Don. The Wall Street Journal, not exactly a bastion of anti-capitalist sentiment, refutes Big Tobacco's smear campaign as the lowest form of character assassination! And now, even now, when every word of what [our whistle-blower] has said is printed...the cat totally out of the bag, you're still standing here debating! What else do you need?

Hewitt was afraid of Big Tobacco. He was afraid of all of these rich and powerful men. Understandably. They were a force to be reckoned with. They were totally united. Indivisible. I mean, do you remember when the seven CEOs of big tobacco stood before committee in Congress and testified—collectively and

individually—that they did not believe that nicotine was addictive...not in 1950 but in 1994?!?! Of course, Don Hewitt was afraid...but we have to find our courage in times like these.

Christopher Plummer played a character named Mike Wallace, the well-known CBS news anchor. He was the one that called Don out. He said, “You messed up, Don” and took him by surprise.

Off-stride, Don pushed back and said, “[Don’t worry.] Stick with me like always and we’ll be okay. These things have a half-life of fifteen minutes...”

And Mike Wallace interrupts him, saying, “No, Don, that’s fame. Fame has a fifteen-minute half-life. Infamy lasts a little longer.”

Knowing the difference between the choice that leads to fame and the choice that leads to infamy can be surprisingly difficult in the moment. It’s easy and it’s obvious in retrospect...but can be a challenge at the time...because you might have to change my mind about a lot of things. You might have to stretch. You might have to become more flexible. That’s hard for us. It’s rare.

It is not important to search for that which simply cannot be found. It is important to search—and to search without ever ceasing—for that which is rarest, for that which is singular and most precious in all the world. We search for the beautiful, for that quality of conscious attention that invites us nearer to God or to Spirit or to the spirit of life or to the great mystery... We search for that quality of wakefulness that appears as heaven here on earth.

There is an interesting poem about heaven. Not the untouchable heaven or the only if your good enough heaven or the you have to stop breathing heaven...not any one of those. This poem is about heaven here on earth. It was written by Tuck Address and Patti Cathcart and it’s called *Heaven Down Here*. The words are these:

What are you waiting for, believe in me
Isn't it love in this life that you need
You can offer your soul to an altar of sacrifice
But give your heart to me
Let's bring Heaven down here
Let's bring Heaven on down
I don't want to wait for the angels
Let's bring Heaven down here

—Tuck Address and Patti Cathcart

Would you like to hear a little story about heaven?

There was a semi-pro golf tournament that took place every autumn. It took place on beautiful grounds so it attracted a high degree of talent, even though the \$500 prize was considered modest by industry standards. On the day of the tournament, something rather magical happened. The dark horse won the day. The unlikely candidate ended up with all of the breaks falling in his favor. A player who was ranked 12th of fifteen walked away victorious. The media were astounded and the 12th seed player was instantaneously surrounded by area news station microphones and flashing cameras. There was a whirlwind of activity.

Very quickly, it was over and the frenzied media types delivered their interviewing energies on the higher ranked celebrities who had been favored for triumph. The actual winner was not upset but was actually tickled that they all moved on so soon. It freed him up, though, to head back home to his family.

On his way to his car, he was approached by a woman who was terribly distraught. “Forgive me for y intrusion. I don’t mean to bother you,” she said. “May I speak with you for a moment.”

“Of course. What’s bothering you,” he said. “I can see that you’re upset.”

“It’s my daughter,” the woman said. “She is in the hospital. I knew I couldn’t afford it but I had to find a way to stop the seizures. They’re not sure what’s wrong with her. They are running a second series to tests. My husband walked out. I have been on my own for a while. I have handled most things ok until this moment...until right now. I have run out of money. I was barely able to pay the doctors for even the first round of tests. I cannot afford the second even though I told them that I could. And treatment... I can’t even begin to think about paying for treatment.

The man laughed gently to himself and asked, “What is your name, my friend.”

“Evelyn,” she said, “Evelyn Mason-Henry.” She offered her hand in greeting. “It’s hyphenated. Still hyphenated, I guess. I really don’t know what’s going to happen. This is difficult for me.”

And the newly victorious golf semi-pro, dark horse that he was, wrote, ‘Pay to the order of Evelyn Mason–Henry’ of the back of his \$500 prize and he gave it to her. He got into his car and he left, leaving her speechless in the parking lot, slack-jawed and amazed. He drove off unaware of the media-types that were trying to wave him down.

A few months later, the same golfer entered another semi-pro tournament. He loved to play. He was similarly ranked...in the bottom third of all of the competitors. He wondered if his luck would be the same. Before the competition began, however, he was approached by someone from the media, a sports journalist who covered all of the tournaments like this one. He said, “Hello,” to the dark horse golfer. “Might I have a minute of your time? You see, I have been covering events like this one for a few years now. This is my beat, if you know what I mean. The woman who approached you last time... Well, she’s a major swindler. I have seen here at similar events all year round. She looks for the winners. Then, she dumps one of her super sad tales of woe and asks for help. I’m sure she must have done the same to you. I should have seen it coming. I thought to warn you but it was too late. I tried to chase you down in the parking lot but I wasn’t fast enough. She descended on you and had her way before I could alert you about how things are with her.”

“Oh, my God,” the golfer said. “I can’t believe it. Do you mean to tell me that there is not baby in the hospital? ...no child at risk from life-threatening seizures of some kind?:

“I’m afraid not,” the journalist said.

“That, my good friend,” the dark horse golfer said, “that is the best news that I have heard all day!”

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In this story, the central character made an unlikely choice, an unusual choice—the choice to value the absence of sorrow and the absence of suffering more than presence of trickery and deceit. The central character chooses to value the internal, spiritual reality—the reality that is ever and always within our control—over the external. The external world is never in our control. Sometimes it rains on the day of the picnic. Sometimes, the car breaks down. Things change in the world around us. Change is inevitable. Growth is optional. Choosing to grow can be revolutionary.

In theology, the revolutionary choice is incredibly powerful—moving mountains and bring heaven down to earth. In a book call The Case for God by Karen Armstrong, the author writes about an argument that took place between Arius and Athanasius in 320, a little more than 1,700 years ago. Armstrong explained that,

Over the centuries, Arianism has become a byword for heresy but at the time, there was not officially orthodox position and nobody knew whether Arius or Athanasius was right.

Arius or Athanasius argued about the nature of Jesus. Was he made wholly of God, immaculately conceived through Mary or was he born of Mary. They asked what definition of Jesus helps us to live life more beautifully?

Arius was the one who walked the lonelier road. In common understanding,

Arius is notable primarily because of his role in the [Arian controversy](#), a great fourth-century theological conflict that led to the calling of the first [ecumenical council](#) of the Church. This controversy centered upon the nature of the Son of God, and his precise relationship to God the Father. Before the council of Nicaea, the Christian world knew several competing...ideas. Church authorities condemned some of these ideas but did not put forth a uniform formula. The [Nicaean formula](#) was a rapidly concluded solution to the general...debate.^[13]

The ideas of Arius were the ideas that were condemned. As Armstrong writes,

“Arius did not deny that Jesus was God, but suggested that he merely had been promoted to divine status.”

These ideas were too radical. They were heretical, in fact. A “heresy” is commonly understood to be an “opinion profoundly at odds with what is generally accepted.” It is theologically understood to be a “belief or opinion [that is] contrary to orthodox religious doctrine.” The original meaning of the word, however, its etymology is so interesting. It comes from Old French based in Latin and based in Greek meaning choice, meaning the power to choose.

The power to choose is based on independence and on interdependence. We need to think and we need to reason for ourselves AND we need to talk about what we think in a healthy environment. Independence and interdependence are linked. Without this coupling, we end up with coercive embattlement, not culture. Growth is not possible by way of coercive embattlement. Growth is cultivation. We don’t always choose it because it’s hard but revolutionary growth is our opportunity...even if it seems like heresy to the rich and the powerful.

Al Gore became a heretic. He made a revolutionary choice and spoke an inconvenient truth. In fact, he created a famous film so named. Like Arius long before him, he is being made to pay the price. The choice to speak one’s truth is not without consequences. In 2006, Al Gore’s revolutionary words were these:

I’ve been trying to tell this story for a long time and I feel as if I’ve failed to get the message across. I was in politics for a long time. I’m proud of my service. There are good people who are in politics in both parties who hold [the issue of climate change...the issue of global warming] at arm’s length because if they acknowledge it and recognize it, then a moral imperative to make big changes is inescapable.

Al Gore is not afraid of rich and powerful men...not like Don Hewitt was when he was faced with going up against Big Tobacco.

As we become more brave, fear is slowly becoming less effective in our world. Maybe this is the true revolution. Today is the 4th of July. Today is Independence Day. As we celebrate for the first time since the January Insurrection, it’s wise to raise a question: “What does freedom mean these days?” because the definition keeps changing. Does it mean freedom from tyranny like it did for Tea Party in Boston back in 1773? Does it mean freedom from fear like it did for FDR after the Crash of 1929? Does it mean freedom from fraud as Allen Weisselberg, the chief financial officer of the Trump Organization surrender to New York authorities after indictments by a grand jury? What definition of freedom helps us all to live life more beautifully?

As change is inevitable and as growth is optional, may be all be flexible enough to choose not the paths that lead to sorrow and suffering, the paths that lead to trickery and deceit but the paths that lead to greater peace and happiness for all

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.